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One Senate panel, two Delawareans

WASHINGTON — The marbles continue to roll into place for organization of the new Congress, even before the old version leaves town, and it looks like — for the first time in a couple of decades — two Delawareans will be facing each other across a committee table.

Sen. Bill Roth has been tapped to fill a Republican opening on the Senate Intelligence Committee where Democrat Joe Biden has been serving for four years.

It's not a particularly advantageous assignment for a senator such as Roth, who's gearing up a re-election campaign. Reporters usually don't cover Intelligence Committee meetings. Cameras are barred except for some occasional formal shots before the senators start talking business. It's one of the rare committees on Capitol Hill that holds most of its meetings behind closed doors.

Even the loquacious Biden, who usually is not reluctant to talk about anything, announced when he joined the committee that he'd have little to say about its deliberations. He was right.

Aides say Roth has been tossing out feelers, to Senate GOP leaders, about an Intelligence seat for several months. When the GOP seized control, behold: A seat was available.

Biden, who was one of the committee's charter members in 1976, has just been reappointed to a second four-year term. But a Senate rule, applying only to the Intelligence Committee, requires reappointed senators to return to the bottom of the seniority ladder. That means Roth and Biden will be staring at each other from the lowest seats on their parties' sides of the table.

It's the first time two Delawareans have served on the same committee since 1960 when Democrat J. Allen Frear and Republican John J. Williams were on the Senate Finance Committee.

The Intelligence seat is sort of a consolation prize for Roth, who won't be vice chairman of the House-Senate Joint Economic Committee as he had hoped. As these words were being written, doubts were being expressed in Roth's office that he would even remain on the economic panel.

In an interview two weeks after the election, Roth said he was looking forward not only to chairing the Governmental Affairs Committee, but to the vice chairmanship of the Joint Economic Committee, a seat to which he felt he was entitled by seniority.

The Joint Economic Committee holds a lot of hearings, compiles a lot of studies and produces a lot of recommendations but handles no legislation. Every two years its chairmanship rotates between the House and Senate. Next year it's the House's turn, leaving the vice chairmanship to the senior senator of the majority party. That, indeed, is Roth.

But a feisty Iowa conservative named Roger Jepsen, who has been a senator two years, thought otherwise. He argued that the vice chairmanship of the Joint Economic Committee is equal in stature to being chairman of a real committee

and no one is allowed to chair two committees simultaneously.

And if that argument prevailed, the next guy in line to be vice chairman is, of course, Roger Jepsen.

Roth could have forced a showdown over the job in a conference of all Republican senators. But he didn't. Instead, according to two folks in a position to know, he offered Jepsen a deal.

If Jepsen would back off, and let Roth have the title so he could use it on his campaign literature, the Delawarean would let Jepsen hire most of the committee staff. Jepsen, the two sources say, didn't buy it.

Aides to Roth say they've never heard of such a deal. But, then, aides aren't told everything.

So Roth got the Intelligence Committee seat and now finds his membership on the Joint Economic Committee imperiled by a Senate rule that restricts senators to three committees. But that rule, as Joe Biden quickly will tell you, can easily be waived.